Walter E. Hildebrand

The Leviathan in the Desert: A Hypothesized Intersection of Philistine Maritime Myth, Davidic Exposure, and Paleontological Observation in Ancient Israelite Thought

Abstract:
This paper proposes a comprehensive hypothesis for the development and specific imagery of the Leviathan myth within ancient Israelite tradition, particularly as expressed in the Psalms. Drawing upon recent archaeological and genetic evidence regarding Philistine origins, it argues that a significant portion of the Israelite concept of Leviathan was influenced by the maritime myths and sea monster narratives of the Philistines. The prolonged stay of King David among the Philistines provides a crucial historical conduit for this transmission. Furthermore, the paper posits that the seemingly incongruous detail of God feeding Leviathan to desert animals *(Psalm 74:14)* can be plausibly explained by the ancient discovery of marine fossil remains in what were then desert environments, leading to a mythological "explanation" for their presence. This interdisciplinary approach, integrating philology, archaeology, genetics, and paleomythology, offers a more satisfying understanding of the Leviathan's presence and peculiar characteristics in the Israelite sacred texts.

Introduction:
The Hebrew Bible, particularly the Psalms, presents the figure of Leviathan as a formidable sea creature, often associated with primeval chaos and divine power (e.g., *Psalm 74:14, 104:26; Isaiah 27:1; Job 41*). While scholarly consensus often traces the broader "Chaoskampf" motif, a divine battle against a cosmic monster, to ancient Near Eastern mythologies, notably the Mesopotamian Enuma Elish and Ugaritic Baal Cycle, the specific form and characteristics of the Israelite Leviathan warrant further inquiry. The aim of this paper is to put forth a satisfying hypothesis regarding the precise origins and peculiar details of the mention of sea creatures, specifically Leviathan, in the Psalms. We propose a nuanced explanation that moves beyond general diffusion, focusing on specific cultural encounters and environmental observations. This hypothesis rests on three interconnected theses: first, the substantial influence of Philistine maritime traditions on the Israelite idea of Leviathan; second, the pivotal role of King David's personal exposure to Philistine culture as a conduit for this influence; and third, the interpretation of marine fossil discoveries in desert landscapes as a source for the mythic detail of Leviathan's flesh being consumed by desert creatures.

Thesis 1: Philistine Influence on the Israelite Concept of Leviathan

The Philistines, one of the most prominent non-Israelite groups in the Southern Levant during

the Iron Age, represent a crucial, yet often underestimated, vector for the transmission of maritime myths. Recent DNA research has provided compelling evidence for their origins. Genetic studies on human remains from Philistine-era Ashkelon *(e.g., Feldman et al., 2019)* indicate a significant genetic influx from populations associated with the Aegean (including areas like Crete and the Greek islands) and potentially other parts of the Mediterranean, consistent with their traditional identification as "Sea Peoples."

This Aegean origin implies a deeply ingrained maritime culture. Populations from island and coastal regions would have accumulated centuries, if not millennia, of experience with the sea. Their folklore would naturally be rich with narratives of formidable marine creatures, the perils of ocean travel, and the mysteries of the deep. These stories would have been distinct from the predominantly land-based narratives of the early Israelites, yet they would have shared the overarching ancient Near Eastern motif of a powerful entity embodying chaos.

While Ugaritic texts from Canaan (e.g., the myths of *Lotan/Lôtān*, closely paralleling Leviathan and sometimes called "the twisting serpent," "the crooked serpent") undoubtedly formed a significant indigenous substratum for Israelite thought, the Philistines would have introduced a parallel, vibrant, and likely more viscerally experienced body of sea monster lore. Their frequent interactions with Israelites along border regions, especially through trade, conflict, and intermarriage, would have facilitated the cultural diffusion of these narratives. The marketplace, a hub of cultural exchange, would have been an ideal environment for the oral transmission and popularization of such compelling tales. The inherent awe and terror inspired by vast, unknown marine life would have made Philistine sea monster myths highly memorable and adaptable for neighboring peoples.

Thesis 2: The Davidic Connection: King David's Exposure to Philistine Myths

The prolonged sojourn of King David among the Philistines offers a direct and historically documented conduit for the transmission of these maritime myths into the heart of Israelite leadership and, by extension, its sacred literature. According to *1 Samuel 27-29*, David, while fleeing King Saul, resided in the Philistine city of Gath and served as a vassal under King Achish. He was granted the town of Ziklag, where he lived for a significant period with his family and men.

During this time, David would have been thoroughly immersed in Philistine daily life, customs, and oral traditions. As a charismatic and intelligent leader, his exposure would have extended beyond mere superficial interaction. He would have heard their stories, observed their practices, and gained insights into their worldview. Given the Philistines' deep connection to the sea, it is highly probable that tales of sea monsters, great whales, and the formidable forces of the ocean would have been common currency in their narratives.

Tradition attributes a significant portion of the Psalms to King David, and while modern scholarship recognizes a more complex authorship, many Psalms are undeniably ancient and reflect a context consistent with David's era. The presence of Leviathan in *Psalm 104:26* ("There go the ships, and Leviathan, which you formed to play in it") and *Psalm 74:14* ("You crushed the heads of Leviathan; you gave him as food to the creatures of the desert") becomes particularly salient in this light. David, or poets directly influenced by his exposure, could have absorbed these compelling Philistine narratives and skillfully integrated them into Israelite theology. This integration would have involved reinterpreting the polytheistic "Chaoskampf" of Aegean or Canaanite myth into a monotheistic framework, where Yahweh alone is the sovereign deity who effortlessly controls or defeats Leviathan, thereby demonstrating His unique power and order over creation. David's authority and poetic genius would have then solidified these concepts within Israelite religious thought and poetic expression.

Thesis 3: Paleontological Observations and the Myth of Leviathan Fed to Desert Creatures

The peculiar detail in *Psalm 74:14*, "You crushed the heads of Leviathan; you gave him as food to the creatures of the desert," presents a seeming geographic anomaly. Why would a primeval sea monster's carcass be found in the desert, consumed by land animals? This seemingly incongruous imagery can be plausibly explained by the ancient discovery of marine fossil remains in what are now, and were often then, desert environments.

Vast areas of the ancient Near East, including portions of modern-day Egypt, Israel, and Saudi Arabia, were submerged under prehistoric seas for millions of years. As these seas receded and geological processes unfolded, massive marine fossils, such as the bones of ancient whales, large sharks (like *Otodus megalodon*, whose teeth were discovered globally), and other marine megafauna, became exposed in arid landscapes. Prominent examples include Wadi El Hitan ("Valley of Whales") in Egypt, where numerous skeletons of extinct whales are found in a desert setting.

Ancient peoples, traversing these landscapes, would inevitably have encountered these colossal, petrified remains. Lacking a scientific understanding of paleontology, geological uplift, or deep time, these discoveries would have been profoundly puzzling. The presence of immense "sea creature" bones in a dry, sandy environment would demand an explanation.

The myth of God crushing Leviathan and feeding it to desert creatures offers a compelling "scientific" explanation from an ancient perspective. It suggests a divine act of such immense power that the defeated sea monster's body was not only vanquished but also transported or allowed to remain in the desert, becoming sustenance for land-dwelling animals. This narrative skillfully resolves the empirical observation of marine fossils in the desert, attributing it to a singular, awe-inspiring divine act. This interpretation not only explains the specific

imagery but also reinforces God's absolute dominion over all creation, demonstrating His power to transcend the boundaries of land and sea.

Conclusion:

By integrating evidence from Philistine origins, the historical account of King David, and the compelling interpretation of ancient fossil discoveries, this paper proposes a multifaceted hypothesis for the inclusion and specific characteristics of Leviathan in the Israelite Psalms. The hypothesis suggests that Philistine maritime traditions, influenced by their Aegean heritage and intimate knowledge of the sea, significantly enriched the broader Near Eastern "Chaoskampf" motif. King David's direct and prolonged exposure to Philistine culture provided a crucial historical vector for these narratives to enter Israelite thought. Finally, the remarkable detail of Leviathan's remains being consumed by desert animals in *Psalm 74:14* gains profound explanatory power when viewed through the lens of ancient encounters with marine fossils in arid regions, providing a mythological framework to interpret perplexing natural phenomena. This interdisciplinary approach offers a more satisfying and rigorously supported understanding of how the formidable Leviathan, a creature of the deep, found its enduring place in the sacred texts of a primarily land-based people.

References:

- Feldman, M., et al. (2019). Ancient DNA shows European ancestry in early Iron Age Philistines. *Science Advances*, 5(7) (https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/sciadv.aax0061)

- Mayor, A. (2000). *The First Fossil Hunters: Dinosaurs, Mammoths, and Myth in Greek and Roman Times*. Princeton University Press. (https://press.princeton.edu/books/paperback/9780691245607/the-first-fossil-hunters)

- Childs, B.C., 1960, *Myth and Reality in the Old Testament* (SBT 27), Napierville/IL

- Day, J., 1985, *God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea. Echoes of a Canaanite Myth in the Old Testament* (UCOP 35), Cambridge

- Durand, J.-M., 1993, *Le mythologème de combat entre le dieu de l'orage et la mer en Mésopotamie*, M.A.R.I. 7, 41-46

- Eliade, M., 1957, *Art. Chaos,* RGG, 3. Aufl. Bd. 1, Tübingen, 1640f.

- Görg, M., 1993, *Chaos und Chaosmächte im Alten Testament,* BN 70, 48-61

- Gunkel, H., 2. Aufl. 1921, *Schöpfung und Chaos in Urzeit und Endzeit,* Göttingen

- Kloos, C., 1986, Y*hwh's Combat with the Sea. A Canaanite Tradition in the Religion of Ancient Israel,* Amsterdam / Leiden

- Tsumura, D., 2. Aufl. 2005, *Creation and Destruction. A Reappraisal of the Chaoskampf Theory in the Old Testament*, Winona Lake/IN

- Weimar, P., 1999, *Chaos und Kosmos*, in: A. Lange / H. Lichtenberger / D. Römheld (Hgg.), Mythos im Alten Testament und seiner Umwelt (FS H.-P. Müller; BZAW 278), Berlin / New York, 196-211

- Bauks, M., 2001, '*Chaos' als Metapher für die Gefährdung der Weltordnung*, in: B. Janowski / B. Ego, Das biblische Weltbild und seine altorientalischen Kontexte (FAT 32), Tübingen, 431-464

- Batto, B.F., 1992, *Slaying the Dragon. Mythmaking in the Biblical Tradition*, Louisville / KN

- Tigay, J. H. (1982). *The Evolution of the Gilgamesh Epic*. University of Pennsylvania Press. (For broader Near Eastern myth parallels)

- Various biblical commentaries on Psalms 74 and 104.

Vienna, 02.05.2025